



Modris Eksteins, *Solar Dance: Van Gogh, Forgery, and the Eclipse of Certainty*
Solar Dance: Van Gogh, Forgery, and the Eclipse of Certainty by Modris Eksteins

Review by: John Brewer

The Journal of Modern History, Vol. 85, No. 3 (September 2013), pp. 716-718

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/670912>

Accessed: 06/03/2014 11:28

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Modern History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

and National Socialist Party member Alfred Hugenberg and the industrialist Hugo Stinnes. The result of these contradictions was the merging of an older elitism with new notions of leadership to produce a status-based politics that nonetheless drew on emotional fervor to appeal to the masses.

The second half of Kemper's book is largely devoted to a discourse analysis of clusters of themes taken up in the *Gewissen*, including education, the revision of Versailles, the foreign political order, and economic authoritarianism. In this exhaustive section, the lack of a coherent chronological narrative can be distracting; the analyses are better read as distinct essays. One is also grateful for the appendix with a graph detailing the network of organizations and an alphabetic list of individuals and their biographical data. That the publisher offers as an online resource Kemper's index of articles from the *Gewissen* will no doubt be invaluable to future researchers. Unfortunately, *Das "Gewissen"* shares one shortcoming with many of the new works in network studies: the glaring absence of women. Kemper insists that the *Gewissen* was a "periodical indisputably dominated by men," for during the six years examined, only five or six women produced articles, and three of them were wives of the authors (46). Nonetheless, increasing historical evidence suggests that women played critical roles in facilitating professional introductions—that is, the very networks in question. Given the meticulous level of biographical research throughout the study and the acknowledged role played by Lucy (née Kaerrick) Moeller v.d. Bruck in her husband's personal and professional life (to which Kemper devotes a passing discussion [85–86]), it seems like a missed opportunity to explore this aspect of interconnectedness in the wider circle.

Das "Gewissen" makes an indispensable contribution to excavating the biographical and institutional conditions, and the intellectual confluences of the young conservatives, a scholarly achievement that is distinctive of the author's own network. As a thesis under Axel Schildt, who has continued the legacy of Detlev Peukert's rigorous sociological analysis at the Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg, *Das "Gewissen"* characteristically combines biographical data with probing intellectual analysis for a *Geistesgeschichte* that is "equally qualitative as quantitative" (434).

EMILY J. LEVINE

University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Solar Dance: Van Gogh, Forgery, and the Eclipse of Certainty. By Modris Eksteins. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp. 368. \$27.95.

Modris Eksteins's *Solar Dance* centers on one of the most famous art forgery cases of the twentieth century, the trial in Weimar Berlin of Otto Wacker, dancer turned art dealer, for the forgery of thirty-four works attributed to Vincent Van Gogh. Wacker's fakes were first detected in late 1927, when they were to appear in a major exhibition of the painter's works held in collaboration with the famous Cassirer gallery, which had done so much to make Van Gogh one of the most admired modern painters in Germany. Eventually brought to trial in April 1932, Wacker was found guilty of knowingly passing off fakes; his appeal failed, and he was condemned to nineteen months in prison and to pay a large fine.

Eksteins's account of the trial and its surrounding events is the best in English on the subject, a painstaking and revealing reconstruction that overcomes the seemingly intractable difficulty that the official court record went missing during the Second World

War. The story he tells is of a sensational and avidly followed trial in which the peccadilloes, contradictions, and blatant conflicts of interest within the art world were laid bare. Wacker's story of a cache of Van Goghs held by an émigré Russian aristocrat who would only sell on condition of anonymity had been credulously accepted by experts, dealers, and collectors, all excited by the presence on the art market of a large collection of Van Goghs at a point when the artist's work was increasingly unobtainable. Wacker, like many con men, put up a good performance in court; the experts made a feeble showing. Jacob-Baart de la Faille, the Dutch author of the catalogue raisonné of Van Gogh's works, originally authenticated all Wacker's forgeries, then retracted his attributions before the trial, only to repudiate his retractions of five of the paintings while he was giving evidence. Julius Meier-Graefe, critic, dealer, impresario, and biographer (and inveterate promoter) of Van Gogh as transcendent genius and as the missing link between French postimpressionism and contemporary German art, abjectly confessed to being duped; others believed some, but not all, of the Wacker pictures to be authentic. The body of technical evidence offered at the trial was against Wacker, but his defense counsel plausibly (but unsuccessfully) argued that the confusion and conflicting testimony of the experts were grounds for dismissing the charges against him.

Eksteins wants to place his admirable reconstruction of the events of 1927–32 in a larger context, taking up contemporary comment that “the darker the times, the more we see attempts to fake everything, even pictures” (211). He makes two main claims. The first has to do with the growing sense of uncertainty spread both by Wacker's forgeries and by what the author sees as the labile and protean character of Weimar culture, which he describes as “this world where any notion of essence was the real sin, the rebels were the heroes, the transgressors the pure at heart. Equivocation on every level was the norm” (96). Wacker, argues Eksteins, with his playacting and duplicity, his use of an alias when he performed as a professional dancer, his insinuating ambition and androgynous appearance, was the personification of such uncertainty—his pictures emblems of a German cultural malaise. His story, says Eksteins, is important because “many of the issues confronting Weimar remain issues for us today as well—above all, the question of what is true and what is real.” But Eksteins wants to push the argument further, seeing the Weimar crisis as “the onset of our own crisis, where, as on Pinocchio's Pleasure Island, art and entertainment have become blurred, where information and disinformation have become difficult to separate, where mundane reality and gleaming image often pretend to be the same” (3). Why the problem of truth and realism should be an issue peculiar to Weimar isn't clear—such problems date back to the Ancients, just as the insinuating con man and counterfeiter (think Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*) is hardly a new figure or one peculiar to Germany in the 1920s. And the claim that Weimar Germany was the origin of commercialized illusion would appall the nineteenth-century entrepreneurs and impresarios who made fortunes staging spectacles long before the advent of German Expressionist cinema. This is not to say that there were no singular features to Weimar German culture (although we should beware of a rather simplistic *Geistesgeschichte*), only that they are not to be found in the case of Otto Wacker, his forgeries, or his trial.

Indeed all the issues exposed around the Wacker affair can also be seen in the two other notorious art forgery/attribution cases of the twentieth century whose contexts were radically different from that of Weimar Germany. The case of *Hahn v. Duveen* of 1929, a dispute over a putative Leonardo tried in New York, and the prosecution in 1947 Amsterdam of Han Van Meegeren for faking a number of Dutch masters, notably Vermeers, both involved protagonists who were protean and duplicitous (dodgy pictures tend to come with dodgy people) but who nevertheless excited considerable public sympathy,

much of it fueled by the exposure of the inadequacies of so-called art experts or connoisseurs. The context of all three cases was a bull market and public interest in the artists concerned, a desire for both patriotic and art historical reasons to authenticate the art works, and uncertainties and disagreements over the nature and accuracy of art attributions, together with an opportunistic willingness to exploit these circumstances for personal aggrandizement and profit. These specific circumstances, not some vague culture of the times, explain the cases.

Eksteins's second claim is for the influence of Van Gogh as both man and artist. His growing popularity, as the author shows, is indisputable. But what is the source of his appeal and the extent of his influence? Here again the argument is unclear. Eksteins does a good job of showing how a protean Van Gogh has been taken up and used by different interests, from Weimar aesthetes to modern radicals, but he also posits an essential Van Gogh, one who embodied spiritual crisis: "In the end Van Gogh's brilliance may have been his doubt" (1); "In his early life religion was his art; in later years his art became his religion. In this he was representative of a tendency in modern western culture as a whole" (16); his "ability to capture anxiety in the framework of nature and tradition . . . made him so relevant to the modern and postmodern worlds" (261). The weakness of such generalities lies in their inattention to Van Gogh's qualities as a painter and to the degree that his life as an artist perfectly followed a well-known trajectory of romantic genius. Cultural history is perhaps less flamboyant and exciting when it avoids grand generalities, but it is also more persuasive.

JOHN BREWER

California Institute of Technology

Propaganda: Medien und Öffentlichkeit in der NS-Diktatur; eine Dokumentation und Edition von Gesetzen, Führerbefehlen und sonstigen Anordnungen sowie propagandistischen Bild- und Textüberlieferungen im kommunikationshistorischen Kontext und in der Wahrnehmung des Publikums. Volumes 1 and 2.

Edited by *Bernd Sösemann* in collaboration with *Marius Lange*. Beiträge zur Kommunikationsgeschichte, volume 25.

Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011. Pp. cxlvi+732; pp. viii+1638. €196.00.

As someone who prefers to review concise monographs, I approached this collection with trepidation. Sixteen hundred pages and over 1,200 primary sources on Nazi propaganda could make for a mind-numbing slog. But these two volumes are anything but that. Instead, they capture the multifaceted nature of Nazi rule, offering both a sobering survey of Hitler's attempts to control a population and a reminder of how nuanced our understanding of the Third Reich has become. For this compilation eschews a portrayal of the Nazis as omnipotent masters of manipulation. Instead, we see how much the regime's propaganda efforts were a work in progress—an often sophisticated, occasionally ad hoc, and at times surreal effort to forge a racially and ideologically unified populace.

It is important to note what this book is not. It is not a compendium of well-known speeches about propaganda and state mandates about censorship. Rather, the editors have combined familiar documents with a wealth of newer, sometimes unconventional sources that invite the reader to consider what daily life was like under Nazi rule. Sösemann and Lange open their collection with an interpretive essay that draws upon recent studies about the dynamics of Nazi society. Key to this literature is the concept of the